UC SANTA BARBARA

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Play Time

Playwrights will be exploring the age of COVID for decades to come. In a sense, said Jo Palazuelos-Krukowski, Pedro Calderón de la Barca gave us a taste of it 300 years ago with “Life is a Dream” (“La Vida es Sueño”). It’s the story of young prince Segismundo locked in a tower, isolated from society because of an ominous horoscope reading.

How close are the parallels? The public can find out when UC Santa Barbara’s Isla Vista Arts, with support from the Department of Theater and Dance, present “Life Is a Dream” Friday and Saturday, June 4 and 5, at 7 p.m. PDT via Zoom.

“There was a sense of unreality that settled over us at the start of the pandemic,” said Palazuelos-Krukowski, the director of the play and a doctoral candidate in theater and dance. “Many of us expressed how we felt like we were in a movie, in a dream.”

There’s a moment in the play, she said, when the actor playing Segismundo has the palace around him, built with Zoom virtual backgrounds and sound effects — but the audience can clearly see his computer and his carpeted room reflected in his sunglasses.

“We all began living double lives in lockdown,” Palazuelos-Krukowski said, “living in our homes while escaping into books, podcasts, films and television shows.”

With our lives and realities a virtual blur, she said, we find ourselves living the play’s central question: “If we can’t know the difference between what is real and what is

imagined, do the actions we take in our lives even matter? Segismundo's mentor Clotaldo offers us an answer: 'Even in dreams, good deeds are never lost.' "

That's not to say the play is a heavy load of dank philosophizing, Palazuelos-Krukowski said.

"This is a swashbuckling virtual staging of a Spanish Golden Age classic," she said. "Calderón's drama has it all: adventure, revenge, philosophical inquiry, quests for love and honor. We have an incredible cast of young actors that have spent the whole of the spring putting this show together."

The play is part of UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center's annual Shakespeare in the Park production, which is funded through a collaboration with the theater and dance department and the Isla Vista Arts program.

Anna Jensen, director of Isla Vista Arts, said she decided to revise Shakespeare in the Park to include other playwrights who offer different worldviews.

"I considered the plays of the Spanish Golden Age," she said, "and Calderón's 'Life Is a Dream' was an obvious choice: It has all the sword-fighting and action that comes with revenge plots that the Spanish could not get enough of during the 17th century.

"At the same time," Jensen continued, "its characters consider the moral dimension of their lives, even the actual dimensions of their existence. The protagonist, for example, has spent his whole life in a tower and he is finally introduced to the world outside. He reacts with the sense of someone recently awakened, unsure what's real and what has meaning. As the external world opens up to us post-COVID, all of us sense a new urgency to redefine our realities. I would urge people to watch it because it's delightful fun — it also happens to be philosophically deep."

About UC Santa Barbara

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